Exploring Xi’an City Image Disseminative Strategies on the Douyin Short Video Platform Based on the 5W Model

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Abstract

In recent years, the proliferation of short video platforms has become an indispensable part of the components in new media communication, owing to the rapid advancement of the 5G era. Douyin, serves as a pivotal conduit for information editing, publishing, and sharing, while simultaneously functioning as a promotional tool for building urban imagery and disseminating the character of cities. Against this backdrop, the objective of this study is to explore the construction status of Xi’an city image and its communication status on the Douyin platform. The research adopts methods of network survey and questionnaire survey. Based on the framework of the "5W" model, which encompasses the aspects of communicators, content, channels, audiences, and effects, this study investigates the process of construction and dissemination of Xi’an's city image within the realm of Douyin's short videos. Based on this research, it is found that there are still deficiencies in the image-building and communication of Xi’an. In view of the existing problems, this paper puts forward a new strategy for the construction and dissemination of Xi’an city image.

Keywords

5W model, City Image, Douyin Platform, Xi’an

1. Introduction

The city image serves as an outward representation of a city's comprehensive strength, playing an intangible role in both urban competition and development. With the rapid development of information technology since the 20th century, the medium through which mass communication occurs, as well as the pathways for information reception, have undergone transformative changes. This new epoch in media dissemination has facilitated the shaping and propagation of urban images in the age of new media, offering convenient and expedient means for individuals to employ their smartphones to edit and produce textual, visual, and video content. Through conscious or unconscious utilization of diverse media platforms, individuals disseminate urban culture, while recipients of this information from various regions contribute to its further dissemination due to curiosity or a herd mentality. Consequently, the process of urban image formation occurs through a phenomenon akin to fission in its propagation.

On January 6, 2023, the Douyin platform released the latest traffic data in the "2022 Douyin Data Report." The data analysis revealed that in 2022, the highest number of video views on Douyin originated from Xi'an's Tang Paradise. Undeniably, this has exerted a potent promotional effect on crucial pillar industries such as local tourism, investment, and finance. In September 2018, the City Brand Research Office of Tsinghua University's National Image Communication Research Center jointly published the "Short Video and Urban Image Research White Paper." The
content shows that using the diversified characteristics of information dissemination on short video platforms, the shaping and dissemination of city image has important development prospects.

2. Literature review

The current literature on city image research primarily focuses on two main perspectives: urban planning and corporate marketing. However, studies from the field of journalism and communication offer a more comprehensive approach to understanding the complexities of city image construction and dissemination.

One notable contribution to city image dissemination comes from a presentation by Associate Professor Wang Qingyun. In his speech titled "The Communication and Socioeconomic Development of Urban Brand Image" (Wang Qingyun, 2004) emphasized that in response to the expanding scope of resource allocation, countries have directed their investments toward cities with the greatest growth potential. Professor Han Jun's remarkable contribution to the study of city image communication lies in his work, "City Image Communication: Media Roles and Pathways" (Han Jun, 2007). This paper has provided a solid theoretical foundation for subsequent research endeavors in this field.

It was in the 1960s that urban planner Kevin Lynch (Kevin Lynch, 1984) introduced the concept of city image, affirming the significance of the five essential elements inherent in a city. In the realm of urban sociology, Robert Ezra Park (Robert Ezra Park, 1984) and other scholars delved into the shaping and dissemination of city images. Their work employed quantitative research methods to develop an evaluation system for assessing city image dissemination.

Currently, there is a lack of research on city image based on the theoretical model of communication. With the increasing reliance on online communication, the exploration of Douyin platform for shaping and disseminating city images has become crucial. This study aims to analyze the current status and limitations of city image construction and dissemination, propose novel communication strategies, and incorporate the classic 5W model of communication theory to shape and propagate the urban image of Xi'an.

3. Theoretical framework

The investigation of the city image dissemination process necessitates a scholarly approach that is firmly grounded in a scientifically rigorous theoretical framework. Therefore, this study adopts the classical communication theory known as the "5W" model, originally proposed by Harold Lasswell (Lasswell H.D., 2007), an eminent American political scientist, in his influential work "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society" published in 1948. This theory provides a comprehensive framework consisting of five key dimensions: Who, Says What, In Which Channel, To Whom, and With What Effect (Figure 1). Since its inception, the "5W" model has become a guiding paradigm and an essential tool for research in the field of communication studies and its related disciplines. Its systematic approach offers a structured foundation for examining the complexities of city image dissemination and serves as a guideline for this investigation.

![Figure 1. The 5w model of city image building and communication.](image)

4. Method

This study mainly uses the method of network survey. From November 16, 2019 to December 5, 2019, a total of 675 articles or news reports related to city image were captured from the website of “Baidu”, and the obtained information content was summarized by related items of city image; Based on the theme of “Xi'an City Image Building and Communication on Douyin Platform”, combined with the “5W” communication theory, questionnaire design was carried out from five dimensions of communication subject, content, channel, audience, and effect. According
to statistics, 195 valid questionnaires were obtained, and the distribution of gender, age, and occupation in the recovered valid questionnaires was reasonable. Among the respondents, 46.15% are in Xi’an City, 16.41% are in Shaanxi Province but outside Xi’an City, and 37.44% are outside of Shaanxi Province.

5. Findings

From the Perspective of the "5W" Model, the problems in the process of disseminating Xi’an's city image in Douyin

5.1 WHO: the official account of Douyin platform has limited influence on the dissemination

When exploring the realm of Douyin’s platform in search of content related to Xi’an’s urban image, a notable observation emerges: the official self-media accounts representing Xi’an’s urban image fall short in terms of their followers, likes, shares, and comments compared to the accounts operated by individuals and businesses. The official self-media accounts primarily refer to those managed by the Xi’an Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China's Publicity Department, including government-run administrative accounts such as "Xi’an Broadcasting and Television Station," "Xi’an Daily," "Voice of Xi’an Tourism and Culture," "Enjoy Xi’an," and "Civilized Xi’an," among others. These accounts' establishment dates, number of followers, and profile pictures are illustrated in Figure 3. In contrast to personal and business-operated Douyin self-media accounts (Figure 2), the official accounts demonstrate limitations in terms of their influence on disseminating Xi’an's urban image.

Figure 2. The comparison of official account data with personal/corporate data.

5.2 Says What: The serious issue of content homogenization in dissemination on the Douyin platform

The findings obtained from the conducted survey illustrate the responses of the surveyed audience regarding the impact of homogeneous content consumption. Among the respondents, a significant portion of 45.13% expressed a sense of boredom and weariness when exposed to such content, leading them to click the "not interested" button to decrease the likelihood of encountering similar videos in subsequent browsing sessions. Furthermore, 32.82% of the surveyed audience admitted to swiftly scrolling past homogeneous content, showing a lack of engagement or interest. In contrast, a mere 4.10% of the respondents claimed to watch homogeneous videos in their entirety, indicating a certain level of tolerance or preference for repetition. Interestingly, 17.95% of the surveyed audience reported being
indifferent to the presence of homogeneous video content, suggesting a varied range of attitudes and responses within the audience.

5.3 With Which Channel: The dissemination management system of the Douyin platform is still incomplete

In the present era of self-media, where anyone can assume the role of a communicator. However, the authenticity of the information conveyed and its positive implications for urban development often remain unsecured to a significant extent. According to the findings of the conducted survey, it was observed that 56% of the surveyed audience reported encountering instances of "fake news" (reversed news) through the Douyin platform. Furthermore, 22% of the respondents expressed their sustained interest in following the subsequent outcomes of news events, while 8% displayed a lack of trust in official announcements issued by the government. Additionally, 12% of the participants indicated a lack of engagement with news updates.

5.4 To Whom: The Douyin short video platform lacks a sufficiently detailed categorization and divided of its audience groups in terms of dissemination

According to the findings of surveys conducted among different geographic regions and age groups (Figure 3), 40% of users residing within Xi'an city reported encountering videos related to the city's image on the Douyin platform. Among users from outside Xi'an but within Shaanxi province, 12.82% acknowledged coming across videos associated with Xi'an's urban image. In contrast, only 11.28% of users from outside Shaanxi province claimed to have seen similar content. Moreover, 24.10% of Generation Z users indicated encountering videos related to Xi'an's city image, while the figures for Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers were 38.46%, 6.15%, and 4.10%, respectively. These results suggest that users within Xi'an city and the younger demographic have a higher likelihood of encountering videos featuring popular attractions in Xi'an, whereas users from outside the province and older age groups are less likely to come across such content.

5.5 With What Effect: The Excessive Entertainment Orientation and Lack of Depth in the Shaping and Dissemination of Urban Image through Douyin's Short Videos

The process of shaping and disseminating the urban image is a complex and long-term endeavor. The dissemination of Douyin's short videos often exhibits a fragmented nature. An examination of the survey results (Figure 4), which evaluated the public's perception of Xi'an based on urban image-related videos published on Douyin's platform, reveals that 16.41% of respondents perceive Xi'an as a "city of internet celebrities," 24.62% perceive it as a "culinary city," 5.13% perceive it as an "economic city," 1.54% perceive it as a "space city," 3.59% perceive it as a "military-industrial city," 4.10% perceive it as an "innovation city," 21.54% perceive it as a "cultural city," and 23.08% perceive it as a "tourist city." These findings indicate that the majority of the public's overall impression of Xi'an, as derived from Douyin's platform, remains superficial, limited to aspects such as culture, tourism, and cuisine. The public seems
to have limited awareness of Xi’an’s achievements in aerospace, the military-industrial complex, innovation industries, and economic development.

Figure 4. The public’s impression of Xi’an city.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Developing new strategies for Xi’an city image formation based on the "5W" model and the distinctive features of the Douyin Short Video Platform


The presence of official accounts on the Douyin short video platform contributes to the credibility of the platform's content to some extent. However, the impact of these official accounts on the short video platform remains limited. Contemporary audiences are more inclined towards narratives that offer a closer connection to their daily lives. Thus, when official accounts representing a city's image establish a presence on the Douyin platform, they not only serve to guide the construction of the city's image from a top-down approach but also have the potential to cultivate the element of "adorableness" within the city's image, thereby shaping a city image that resonates with the general public's lived experiences. Through the diverse video content disseminated via personal and corporate accounts, an effective cultivation of a city image that aligns with international metropolitan standards is achieved. This multimedia strategy enhances Xi'an's communicative impact and public perception among its targeted audience, thereby fortifying its influence as a globally recognized urban entity.

6.2 Says What: Promoting the participation of various narrative perspectives in content creation, and facilitating the provision of "diversity" for the shaping and dissemination of city images

When creating short videos that depict a city's image, it is imperative for video creators to accentuate the sense of involvement and value that "people" contribute to urban life. By doing so, they can avoid relying solely on grand narratives centered around the city's landscapes. Instead, the thematic focus of these videos should revolve around the inclusive engagement of individuals in the process of constructing the city's brand. This approach facilitates the portrayal of the city's multifaceted aspects and nurtures a more comprehensive understanding and appreciation of its cultural, social, and economic dynamics among the target audience. Diversified public perspectives are more popular with the public and add vitality to the shaping and communication of city images.

6.3 With Which Channel: Enhancing the audit and management mechanisms of the Douyin platform, and integrating both online and offline approaches to prioritize user experience, in order to facilitate the "sustainability" of city image construction and dissemination

As AI and big data algorithms advance, the audit and management mechanisms of the Douyin platform are constantly evolving. However, concerns regarding the presence of potentially false information in self-media video
content persist. Therefore, it is imperative for the Douyin platform to strengthen its audit and management mecha-
nisms and establish a system for public supervision and rewards.

In cases where videos are suspected of containing false information, users can report the content to the platform, providing detailed explanations and supporting evidence. The platform will then verify the veracity of the reported content and implement a reward system for users who have made valid reports. Videos found to contain false information may be subject to limited visibility or removal.

In the era of self-media, the construction and dissemination of a city's image require collective efforts. The Douyin platform can encourage online users to participate in real-city experiences. Establishing dedicated city service centers in key areas can provide assistance to tourists, residents, local businesses, and investors, enhancing their interactions and experiences with the city. To ensure the sustainable development of city image construction, offline efforts should focus on maintenance and hospitality, providing users with satisfactory city experiences.

6.4 To Whom: Based on the optimized tagged users Douyin platform distribute orientated content, which encourages the active involvement of various user in the dissemination of content

The Douyin short video platform can enhance its targeted dissemination by implementing a more refined categorization of its audience. This can be achieved by incorporating a broader range of interest tags and thematic classifications. By leveraging advanced data algorithms and intelligent technology, personalized content recommendations can be provided, thereby encouraging active participation from diverse demographics, including citizens, tourists, local businesses, and investors. Within the realm of Douyin's user-generated media landscape, the audience no longer assumes a passive role as mere recipients of information. Instead, they play a pivotal role as both recipients and creators of content.

When it comes to shaping and promoting the city's image, it becomes imperative to mobilize the active engagement of citizens, tourists, local businesses, and investors on the Douyin platform. By empowering them to become active participants in the dissemination chain, the potential for secondary dissemination can be maximized, thereby paving the way for innovative models where Douyin's short videos emerge as influential forces in driving urban tourism and investment.

6.5 With What Effect: Explore urban traditional cultural resources and regularly adjust dissemination strategies

The Douyin platform, dominated by user-generated content (UGC) production, often resorts to entertainment culture as a substitute for traditional culture in order to attract a larger user base. The platform aims to captivate users' attention and promote the city's image. However, this approach inadvertently dilutes the profound cultural heritage that the city possesses. Xi'an, renowned as an ancient capital with a history spanning thirteen dynasties, boasts a wealth of historical and cultural relics. Unearthing the city's traditional cultural resources involves the exploration of valuable material and non-material legacies inherited from history.

Leveraging the platform's popular trends, the local museum's publicity department could make a series of videos featuring cultural relics, inviting platform users to experience the museum in person. In conclusion, a continuous exploration of the city's existing historical and cultural resources, along with the proactive integration of traditional and popular culture, necessitates periodic adjustments to dissemination strategies. A comprehensive and multi-faceted promotional approach across various platforms is crucial to the city's optimal development and cultural preservation.

In the era of self-media, short video platforms continue to exhibit strong development, and their role in shaping and promoting urban images based on the Douyin platform significantly drives city publicity and development. Therefore, harnessing the potential of the Douyin platform to create distinct and prominent cultural symbols for cities becomes a crucial communication strategy and practical approach for fostering the depth, coherence, sustainability, and growth potential of city images.

References


